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UDOT 're-wiring' I-80 median

by Jamie Belnap

09.11.08 - 04:30 pm



A post hole digger operates between the east and west-bound lanes on I-80 near Saltair Monday. UDOT is installing a barrier between the two lanes to help prevent crossover head-on collisions.

- photography / Troy Boman

Barriers made to eliminate crossover, head-on collisions

The Utah Department of Transportation is installing 15 miles of wire barrier in the median area of I-80 between Lake Point and the Salt Lake International Airport in hopes of preventing many crossover head-on crashes before they happen.

UDOT officials say the barriers, constructed out of a series of three horizontal cables and steel posts, are an additional safety measure beyond the reflective paint, signage, guard rails and safety rumbles — which produce a loud noise when a car is moving too close to the edge of the roadway — that help keep motorists on the roadway.

“It was a project that was developed in Sweden and has proven to be very effective in the elimination of crossover, head-on crashes that happen on the interstate,” said Robert Hull, director of traffic and safety for

UDOT. “It’s a cost-effective solution in reducing fatalities.”

An alternative to cable wires is concrete barriers, but the latter is more expensive and involves a time-consuming installation process.

“Concrete is more labor intensive and the cost of the actual materials is more expensive,” said Adan Carrillo, public information officer for UDOT. “Cables are less time-consuming because once you install it it’s ready to go. When using concrete you have to wait for it to cure and repairs are more expensive.”

The planning phase for the project began a year ago with construction commencing earlier this summer. Installation is expected to be completed sometime this fall, according to Carrillo.

This stretch of freeway isn’t the first to receive the median barrier, Carrillo said. The system is also in place on northbound I-15 through Davis County, I-80 through Parley’s Canyon, portions of I-215, and in southern Utah.

Accident reports compiled by UDOT are what help determine which areas are in need of this type of barrier. Carrillo said statistics show that from 2003 to 2005 there were 11 head-on crashes along this segment of roadway — three of which resulted in fatalities.

“UDOT is systematically installing median barrier along interstate highways in Utah where crash statistics, traffic volumes and highway geometry show that the installation will reduce fatalities and serious injury crashes,” Carrillo said.

Carrillo said the cables are extremely strong. On I-15 earlier this year, a dump truck drove into the median and the cables stopped the heavy vehicle from heading into the opposite lanes of traffic.

“So far in Utah, we have not had a vehicle successfully pass through a median where cable barrier is installed and hit a vehicle traveling in the opposite direction,” Carrillo said. “We have also not had anybody died as a result of hitting the cable barrier. We anticipate that installing cable barrier will eliminate most, if not all, median crossover crashes.”

One recent crash on this stretch of interstate illustrates the importance of this barrier.

On Tuesday afternoon, a 57-year-old Tooele man traveling westbound on I-80 near Saltair lost control of his 1992 Toyota 4-Runner, causing it to roll three times into the median and then into the eastbound lanes of traffic, according to Trooper Josh Workman of the Utah Highway Patrol’s Salt Lake County office.

“Luckily he didn’t hit anyone,” Workman said.

The victim, who sustained moderate injuries, was transported to Intermountain Medical Center.

UHP shut down the eastbound lanes of the interstate for 45 minutes while the accident was cleaned up, and to allow space for a helicopter to land, causing traffic to back up a number of miles into Tooele County.

Workman said this is an example of an accident that could have been prevented by the cable wire system.

“The posts are in, the cables just aren’t up [in that area],” Workman said. “If the accident would have happened a couple of days later, he wouldn’t have crossed into oncoming traffic.”

UDOT is currently looking at additional locations throughout the state where the cable wire fencing could be installed, but Hull said the department has yet to announce any of those locations since funding is pending.

“We are adding them everywhere as we can,” Carrillo said.

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